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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000058

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [SOCI](#) [PINR](#) [MR](#)  
SUBJECT: MINISTER OF ISLAMIC AFFAIRS ON DIALOGUE WITH  
SALAFISTS

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 54

Classified By: CDA Dennis Hankins for Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

11. (C) Summary: The Minister of Islamic Affairs expects to see a majority of the 68 Salafists in detention publicly renounce violence and the extremist ideology expressed by Al Qaeda. While the renunciation of violence will not affect the judicial process against those who have actually committed terrorist acts, it may allow the Mauritanian Government what it needs to reintegrate the majority of those who are being detained for association with terrorists that are not guilty of any terrorist act. The Minister has engaged a broad spectrum of Islamic leaders in the dialogue including some he recognizes have previously been established with the more extremist lines of Islamic thought. The Minister welcomes increased collaboration with the U.S. as the Government advances towards establishing a counter-extremism strategy. The Mission will establish a counter-extremism working group with the Ministry. End Summary

12. (C) Charge met January 24 with Minister for Islamic Affairs and Original Teaching Ahmed Ould Neini (himself an Imam seen as a leader of moderate teaching and head of Mauritania's largest religious school (mahadra)) to discuss the Government's newly opened dialogue with Salafist prisoners. The Minister and a group of prominent Imams have met twice with representatives of the 68 Salafists currently being detained (some already tried and convicted) under Mauritania's anti-terrorism laws. Neini noted that the initiative had come out as a recommendation from a National Conference on Religious Tolerance held January 5. The conference, opened by President Aziz, was chaired by prominent but controversial Imam Mohamed Ould Hacen Ould Deddew (see para. 4) and renounced violence, fundamentalism and terrorism. The first meeting with the Salafists was televised and saw some of the most notorious Mauritanian terrorists calling for a public debate of their arguments for "jihad" against the Islamic leadership's arguments against. In the most recent meeting, held January 23, the same hard-liners had declined television and radio coverage probably, according to the Minister, because many of the detainees were prepared to publicly denounce violence and Al Qaeda.

13. (C) The Minister stressed that his efforts to get the detainees was not directly related to any legal proceedings against them. He saw three groups within the population: the largest group (over 50) who were not being detained for any specific terrorist act but because of their close association via friendship or family with known terrorists; a small group of about a half dozen who had participated in terrorist acts and sought to repent; and, the hard line core of some 10 inmates who remained virulent advocates of extremist violence. The Minister said 57 of the 68 detainees were prepared to repent (40 in a joint declaration and the others individually). The Minister suggested the act of renouncing violence would help the government in allowing the release

and reintegration of those detainees against whom there were no specific charges. He stressed that repentance would not affect the prosecution of those who had committed violent acts although it might be considered in the sentencing phase.

14. (C) Charge noted that there had been some criticism raised within Mauritanian circles concerning the role in the dialogue of Mauritanian Imams who are generally associated with the harder line of Islamic thought -- particularly Imam Deddew. (Bio Note: Deddew has long been associated with an extremist Islamic line and was jailed in the past under President Taya as a Salafist. Opposition figures suggest that many of the current detainees in fact studied at Deddew's mahadra and that he is the spiritual leader of the Salafist movement. Deddew came to prominence last month for negotiating the release of prominent businessmen detained by the Aziz government on corruption charges. He is said to have close ties with Sudan and has previously issued anti-American fatwas (calling for a boycott of American products) related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. End Bio Note). The Minister acknowledged that Deddew is seen as representing the more extreme edge of Mauritania's moderate Islamic current but said that made Deddew's call to renounce violence and extremism all the more effective. The Minister added that the dialogue included a broad spectrum of Imams to provide the maximum credibility.

15. (C) In response to the Charge's question, the Minister said he was interested in reinsertion and deradicalization programs underway in Morocco and Saudi Arabia but had not yet developed a strategy on how to transition convicted terrorists back into society at the end of their sentences.

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He said he was far enough advanced in his counter-extremism thinking that he is now prepared to explore cooperation with the U.S. He designated his Secretary General as his primary point of contact with the Embassy and invited the Charge to propose an American working group that could explore cooperation (Mission has proposed a group headed by the Charge (as DCM) with the Mission's Political Officer, Public Affairs Officer, MIST OIC, and USAID Counter-extremism officer (once the USAID position is filled)). The Minister noted that U.S. engagement on social and religious issues was "sensitive" and needed to be closely coordinated with his Ministry -- apparently in reference to activities the Mission has conducted over the past year without Ministry involvement. The Minister stressed it was not his intent to control our activities, but he wanted to be confident our activities were consistent with his own ministry's objectives. Charge responded that we were clearly aware of the sensitivity of the U.S. dealing with questions of religion and worked hard to make sure we were reinforcing Mauritanian ideas and initiatives. Noting that cooperation with central government authorities had not been possible during the coup, Charge stressed there was an obvious convergence between American and Mauritanian priorities in counter-extremism, Charge welcomed the opportunity to have greater dialogue between the Embassy and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

16. (C) Comment: The dialogue is drawing quite a bit of press and political opposition attention with some being able to turn the tables on the Aziz Government (that cited former president Abdallahi's perceived "softness" on terrorists as one of the justifications for the 2008 coup) by saying Aziz is allowing the government to look weak and willing to negotiate with terrorists as equals. As noted in REFTEL, even some in the government responsible for counter-terrorism are critical of the initiative. Our own analysis of radicalization in Mauritania has always seen the reinforcement of the moderate strains of Islam as a key element in any U.S. counter-extremism program -- so it is not out of the ordinary that the government would use the Islamic leadership to spearhead its own anti-extremism campaign. It appears that the dialogue will not result in terrorists being

released but may help the government finesse the case of detainees who, while suspect, have not committed a prosecutable crime. While we have yet to see a global counter-terrorism/extremism strategy, we are seeing its key components. On the "hard CT" side, we see a reinforcement of capacity with a significant increase in resources and personnel for the military and gendarmerie as well as a revision of the legal and legislative basis of counter-terrorism. The Salafist dialogue serves as a foundation of the "soft CT" strategy of addressing the causes of extremism. The Minister of Islamic Affairs saw himself as the focal point but recognized that other ministries (such as the Ministry of Youth) also had counter-extremism activities.

He noted there is no central coordination of all aspects of a strategy within the Presidency or the Prime Minister's office. A visiting EU delegation looking at security and counter-extremism assistance told Charge January 24 that they also had found many elements of a good Mauritanian approach but no comprehensive strategy -- which they saw as hindering a comprehensive response by partners. End Comment.

HANKINS